

Because the Church Says So and Other Logical Fallacies

October 27, 2019

Fallacies

Earlier this week, a friend posted a meme to my wall. It pointed out that since coffee first reached Europe in 1515 and Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517, caffeinated pastors are to blame for the Protestant Reformation.

While a fun tidbit, this is obviously a fallacy. There are literally thousands of ways it's not true, not the least of which tea has plenty of caffeine, and Europeans were drinking that by the gallon in the 1500s.

This is a clear case in which correlation does not equal causation. When my dad was teaching me logic when I was growing up, his favorite example of this fallacy was "85% of people die in bed, therefore don't go to bed." Just because facts are related, does not determine causality.

That fallacy about coffee and Martin Luther was aptly timed, though, because this year for Reformation Sunday, my thought is to explore the logical fallacy called the "Appeal to Authority." A few weeks back, one of our Confirmation candidates asked me, "If our church doesn't have any doctrine, how do people just not make up whatever they want to believe?" What a great question! You can see why I LOVE teaching Confirmation!

What this young person didn't realize he was asking about was the logical fallacy, the Appeal to Authority; that is, believing something is true simply because an authority says it is true. Again, when my dad was teaching me logic, his classic example here was "You should believe me because I'm Dad, and I know."

Unfortunately, in many churches, this Appeal to Authority is the basis of their doctrine and dogma. If you argue with them, they'll say, "because we're the church, and we said so." This is the logic, or actually the lack of logic, behind some of the more innocuous practices of some churches such as prohibiting dancing, pierced ears, meat on Friday, and yes, the consumption of caffeine. But it is also the logic at work at the center of more substantial doctrines in some churches, particularly around sexual ethics and the role of women and gays both in the church and in society.

There was just a big blow up earlier this month among Evangelical Fundamentalists as John MacArthur, a well-known, middle-aged, white male pastor told a crowd that Beth Moore, a younger female speaker and spiritual writer, shouldn't teach. In fact, she should just "go home." In this particular instance, he's not even arguing about whether or not women ought to be ordained, whether or not we ought to be pastors, but whether or not we ought to be allowed to TEACH! And there are hundreds of articles online right now, backing MacArthur up by enlisting the appeal to authority. Because the church says, or because the Bible says.

Now Ed was absolutely right in the Children's Sermon when he encouraged the kids to learn their Bibles and look to the Bible for answers to life's hard questions. However, as adults, we come to understand that the Bible isn't univocal, that it doesn't have just one easy answer, that many controversial questions in life will find multiple answers in the Bible.

So instead of using the Appeal to Biblical or Church Authority, which we know is a fallacy, as we celebrate both New Member Sunday and Reformation Sunday, I would encourage you to embrace three different principles in biblical interpretation and church doctrine. Because we can never engage the Bible from a void, because we always interpret everything we read and engage, it only makes sense that we have some interpretive commitments. For instance, if you're watching a Disney movie, one of your interpretive commitments is the suspension of disbelief — you commit yourself to talking woodland creatures and the ability to sing underwater. Similarly, if you're watching an Alfred Hitchcock movie, you make an interpretive commitment to knowing that things aren't always as they appear, or those of us who have gone to see Hamilton accept Lyn Manuel Miranda's portrayal of the Founding Fathers as black is an interpretive commitment on how relevant their story still is today.

So too, with Biblical Interpretation. Since we must interpret, I recommend using Jesus, and what we know he was about, as our interpretive commitment. If we were to boil down to its essence Jesus' teachings, we would come up with a list that includes mercy, honesty, compassion, healing, social justice, inclusion of those formerly excluded, restoration of relationship, economic justice, forgiveness, hope, peace, the preferential option for the poor, the power of prayer and Sabbath. When you encounter a scripture passage or a teacher, and you're not quite sure about what they're teaching, use Jesus as your interpretive commitment. If what they're teaching doesn't jibe with the list I just named, I'd keep wrestling with it, because it doesn't sound to be Christlike.

Second, instead of having a static set of beliefs, the United Church of Christ advocates for us to develop a well-formed human conscience in dialogue with community. Through reading and science and human interaction and prayer, our church encourages us to continually be honing our conscience, so that we are continually taking into consideration new data, experiences, and implications. And we are to do so in dialogue with an ethical community, in order that we don't just end up egocentrically going way off into left field because there was nothing tethering us to tradition and accumulated knowledge.

That's really the genius of what we're doing here today, welcoming 16 new members into the life of this church. We're saying to them, and they're saying to us, "Let's help each other figure out what God's doing in our lives. I'd like you to help me discern God's will, and I'd be honored to help you do the same." It's pretty remarkable!

And this really feeds into the third principle I'd lift up: *Semper Reformanda*, or always reforming. Along with the primacy of the Bible over tradition and grace over works, one of the centerpieces of the Reformation is that we are to be always reforming. This dovetails beautifully with the UCC's core value of "Changing Lives." In acknowledging

that our lives and the world are constantly changing all around us, we lean in to the reformation idea that God's people will continually need to re-shape the church to be ever more relevant, ever closer to kingdom of God here on earth.

Think about it — there was a time before Bach, in which organ music was considered circus music and was banned from church. There was a time in which the Bible was used to hold up slavery and misogyny and heterosexism. However, with our commitments to a well-formed human conscience in dialogue with community, Christ as our interpretive commitment, and the charge to be always reforming, we can find the word that God would speak to us today.

The Gospel

Which finally brings us to our Gospel. We hear this story of a Pharisee and a tax collector, and we immediately have some expectations. We have known Pharisees to be foils to Jesus' arguments, and we've known Jesus to eat with and spend time with tax collectors. So when the parable plays out and the Pharisee seems self righteous and the tax collector seems humble, the easy lesson would be: Don't be like the Pharisee who thinks he's better than others...except, in doing so, we'll be thinking that we're better than others, which is exactly what the parable warned us about.

Here's the potential of another logical fallacy at work — circular logic — an argument that just goes round and round. No, Jesus was not only praising the humility of the tax collector, he was also praising his motivation. The tax collector didn't compare himself to the Pharisee. How you are doing ethically, the health of your relationship with God, is not graded on a bell curve. Morality is not something in which we can judge ourselves against others: I don't lie as often as this person; I don't cheat as often as that person; I don't murder as often as that person. While our morals and ethics and values affect others all of the time, Jesus is telling us that we are not to judge ourselves against others.

Conclusion

Friends, on this Reformation Sunday, this 501st anniversary of Martin Luther calling the church to reform, it is an honor to do so once again: to encourage us all to be always reforming, humble in mind and heart, holding to our interpretive commitment of Christ within our Christian community of conscience.

Rev. Bridget Flad Daniels
Union Congregational United Church of Christ
Green Bay, Wisconsin
Joel 2:23-32, Luke 18:9-14
October 27, 2019